

**LIFE LINES: WATER,
LIFE, AND THE INDIAN
EXPERIENCE–
CULTURAL MEANINGS,
SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE
AND LITERARY
IMPLICATIONS***

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This paper is an attempt to examine the socio-cultural significance and the imaginary implications of water—as vital element, aesthetic metaphor, image as well as symbol. Very much like its fluidity and reflective transparency, this vital element plays a significant role in human imagination, and socially constructed reality alike. As one of the most significant primordial elements, water on this planet exists in a variety of forms, volatile and static alike—river and lake, glacier and ice, rain and groundwater. At almost every point in human history the presence of water or the absence of it has played a vital role. Metaphorically, it conceals and reveals at the same time. Bereft of water there is no life, however, too much of it hastens human casualty. Cultural and historical dissimilarities in the approach and response to water are not so evident on the physical and biological planes, however, in its symbolic and spiritual dimension water acquires a variety of meanings over the globe.

if the self regulating arterial course of the sacred river, akin to the bloodstream of men, has constituted one permanent image of the flow of life, the line of waters, from beginning to end, birth to death, source to issue, has been at least as important. It has , moreover, dominated the European and Western language of rivers: supplying imagery for the life and death of nations and empires and the fateful alternation between commerce and calamity. In classical Eastern and near Eastern cultures, the great sacred rivers were seen as temporal and topographical loops. In the Roman West, from a very early date, rivers were conceived as

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roads: highways that could be made straight; that would carry traffic and if necessary, armed men.; that defined entrances and stations. The model for the well behaved watercourse was the aqueduct: the highest achievement of Roman engineering. Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*. New York: Vintage, 1996. p. 261

My paper is broadly divided into two parts: the first is of a general kind that seeks to examine the *social and spiritual significance of water* in the multi-planed context of India, while the second is of a *textual* kind focusing on a work of literature that aims to *problematise* cultural and historical meanings and the literary implications of water in a social context. The chosen text is a work of fiction.

Water has been endowed with vital significance all through human history. Civilisation and culture—however disparate they are-- could be seen to be often so intimately linked to this dynamic fluid. From everyday ablutions to the highest symbolic levels the flow of water assumes infinite dimensions in every people's history. It cuts across human unconscious and the rational political and social systems alike.

Life in present day India is multifaceted and multi-layered, and often revolves round many planes at once— one could easily discern the profound relationship between religious beliefs and ingrained social structures and behavioural patterns. Even contemporary cinema and politics consciously or subconsciously veer in and out of the mythical and the *puranic*—often enough to the advantage of those in power and to the severe handicap of those underprivileged and over-exploited. Societal reality in present day India is reconstructed and deconstructed at will by the powerful memory of the past – however, often enough, only the hollow beliefs and superstitions survive as designs and counter designs of signification. The profundity of the Vedic poetic vision is now virtually unrecognisable in the macro world – however, it survives at the micro levels. Water, along with fire and earth is one of the elements that wield powerful religious and spiritual connotations—not merely in dominant Hindu ceremony and ritual but also in the other structures of beliefs and practice.

My paper intends to close examine the significance of this life-line—the trace, meaning and implication that water evokes as it flows in and out of the lives of people and places in India. Of course, I would also seek its non-human relevance and bearing.

To the *RgVedic* poet, the elemental significance of water appears self explanatory. Sanskrit scholars have drawn attention to the fact that during the Vedic period which was affected severely by frequent floods, water *naturally* appeared to be the earliest element. Therefore in the poet's thought-process what was prior temporally, must have worked like the cause of the Universe. No question is asked about the origin of waters. Even Visvakarman—the creator of the Universe, was preceded by them. In the *Brahmanas* water is described as co-eval with Prajapati. It was reasonable to Vedic people who saw land growing out of accumulations of river-torn silt that water was the primary element and source of all that existed.

The various theories of Vedic cosmogony could fall into three categories:

1. The most primitive ones begin with material principles like water, earth, fire, ether etc.
2. Next come the abstract principles like chaos, time, night, desire, non-being (*asat*) etc. (However, *asat* only meant primordial non-differentiation).
3. In the latest stage of development we come across divine principles like Prajapati, *Brahman*, Visvakarman etc.

In all equally alike, the *apah tatva*¹ plays a prominent role.

The Puranas, on the other hand, are later codifications of myths and legends in the Indian traditions. The Puranas are referred to in the Vedic literature from the Atharva Veda downwards. (J N Farquhar, 1920;rpt.1984) They ideally embody mythical, moral as well as ethical values in their narrative content. In more ways than one, the folk and the classical dimensions interpenetrate each other in the puranic texts. In one of the oldest purana, the *Matsya Purana*, Parvati, Siva's consort, says: *One who digs a well where there*

¹ In the early Vedic cosmogony, the *ap-tattva* receives a good deal of attention. This was prompted, probably, by the historical background of the period. Frequent floods in the Indus Valley have influenced the thought-process of Vedic Aryans when they stated that water was the primordial substance out of which the Universe came into being (*ĪV*, 10.129.1).

The Indus Valley appears to be a target of frequent floods. So also its extention viz. Lothal, Rangpur-Koth in Saurashtra. The accumulation of flood-debris at various sites is an evidence for the inundation of Mohen-jo-daro. The 12 meter-high hill of silt at Budh Takkar is the result of a great flood of long duration, almost a deluge, which must have turned the lower Indus Valley into a vast lake. The Carbon-14 dates for the two great floods at Lothal are 2015 + 115 BC and 1900 + 115 BC. The flood debris of the latest level of HR mound at Mohen-jo-daro is assigned to 2000 BC. The flood in *circa* 1900 BC assumed such fierce proportion and was so prolonged and devastating that all the Harappan settlements in Saurashtra, Kutch and S. Gujarat were wiped out.

is little water lives in heaven for as many years as there are drops of water in it... (Vasudha Narayanan, 2001)

RITUAL SIGNIFICANCE: BATHING IN THE RIVER SIGNIFIED MORAL, PHYSICAL, AND RITUAL PURITY

Right from the ancient times in the Indian subcontinent, water thus has a profound physical and spiritual significance. Bathing in water—in a river, pond or back waters—means more than mere physical ablution—it also signifies moral and ritual purity. Sipping water from one's cupped hands, three times, and allowing it to slip through tilted open palms the Brahmin chants the hymns of the Vedic gods even today in ritual participation with the cosmic elements. Sprinkling water over one's head is also considered equivalent to the ritual bathing. The Brahmin is supposed to take water in his cupped right hand and move it round the rice and victuals on the spread banana leaf before commencing each meal, chanting the various names of vital breath – prana (general term for breath in and out), apana (downward breath), vyana (the bond of union of the two), samana (common to both expiration and inspiration) and udana (leads the soul in deep sleep to the central reality). The presence of water thus is expected to cleanse and make everything sacred and pure. There is a widely held belief that before drinking even the dirtiest unclean water, if one were to chant the names of India's major rivers beginning with the austere Ganga—*even the dirty water will be freed from its contamination.*

Gange cha Ymuna chiva Godavari Saraswati,
Narmade Sindhu Kaveri jalesmin sannidim kuru

[In this water, I invoke the presence of the holy waters from the rivers Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Narmada, Sindhu and Kaveri]

THE STRUGGLE FOR WATER: TWO CONTEMPORARY INSTANCES

In India **Water** has mythical, religious, spiritual, metaphysical, symbolic, and physical significance/dimension. Let us now look at two instances of the struggle for water in contemporary India.

1. NARMADA BACCHAO ANDOLAN: *SAVE NARMADA MOVEMENT*

For over two decades now this struggle has come to symbolise the people's struggle for a just and equitable truly democratic society in India. Narmada is among the great rivers of India, spreading over a vast region in the west, for the most in the state of Gujarat. The government planned to build 30 large and 135 medium and 3000 small dams to harness the swift flowing waters of this mighty river and its tributaries. The projected purpose was of course *to provide larger amounts of water and produce large amounts of electricity for the purposes of development.*

Opponents of the dam question the basic assumptions of the *Narmada Valley Development Plan* and believe that its planning is unjust and iniquitous and the cost-benefit analysis is grossly inflated in favour of building the dams. It is well established that the plans rest on untrue and unfounded assumptions of hydrology and seismicity of the area and the construction is causing large scale *abuse of human rights* and *displacement of many poor* and underprivileged communities. They also believe that water and energy can be provided to the people of the Narmada Valley, Gujarat and other regions through *alternative technologies* and planning processes which can be socially just and economically and *environmentally sustainable.*

2. *COCO COLA* IN KERALA

Kerala is the southernmost state in India and it is famous for its coconut palms, greenery, lagoons, water ways—three major backwaters (lakes)—mountains (the western ghats), and rivers (forty odd, west-running). It is also famous for democratically electing the first ever communist ministry in the world in 1956. Over the last decade Coca cola has managed to procure large areas of land with adequate fresh water sources and set up their plant in a place named Plachimada in Perumatty Panchayat in the Palakkad District.

Meanwhile out in the real world of the Indian countryside, Coca-Cola's bottling plants were getting less enthusiastic reviews. Coca-Cola had sound reasons in zoning in on Plachimada. A rain-shadow region in the heart of Kerala's water belt, it has large underground water deposits. The site Coca-Cola picked was set between two large reservoirs and ten meters south of an irrigation canal. The ground water reserves had apparently showed up on satellite surveys done by the company's prospectors. The Coke site is surrounded by colonies where several hundred poor people live in crowded

conditions, with an average holding of four-tenths of an acre. Virtually the sole source of employment is wage labor, usually for no more than 100 to 120 days in the year.

Ushered in by Kerala's present "reform"-minded government, the plant duly got a license from the local council, known as the Perumatty Grama panchayat. Under India's constitution the panchayats have total discretion in such matters. Coca-Cola bought a property of some 40 acres held by a couple of large landowners, built a plant, sank six bore wells, and commenced operations.

Within six months the villagers saw the level of their water drop sharply, even run dry. The water they did draw was awful. It gave some people diarrhea and bouts of dizziness. To wash in it was to get skin rashes, a burning feel on the skin. It left their hair greasy and sticky. The women found that rice and dal did not get cooked but became hard. A thousand families have been directly affected, and well water affected up to a three or four kilo meters from the plant. The old village wells had formerly gone down to 150 to 200 feet. The company's bore wells go down to 750 to 1000 feet. As the water table dropped, all manner of toxic matter began to rise too, leaching up to higher levels as the soil dried out. Further the waste from the bottling plant was taking the form of the toxic sludge, along with profuse daily donations of foul wastewater.

The company told the locals the sludge was good for the land and dumped loads of it in the surrounding fields and on the banks of the irrigation canal, heralding it as free fertilizer. Aside from stinking so badly it made old folk and children sick, people coming in contact with it got rashes and kindred infections and the crops which it was supposed to nourish died.

Lab analysis by the Kerala State Pollution Control Board has shown dangerous levels of cadmium in the sludge.

But now the Coke officials are under pressure. So is the Kerala government. The government has now separately sent samples of the sludge to various laboratories to test whether the fertiliser indeed contains poisonous toxic materials. (<http://www.counterpunch.org/cockburn04162005.html>)

CONTRADICTIONS

The lived experience in India is so full of such contradictions. The greatest and the most revered river in India is the Ganges. It is the mythical purifier—but, nevertheless, the most polluted of India's rivers. This is often the case with most regional rivers and lakes—they may be so highly venerated as

sources of life and spirit but polluted drastically, indiscriminately. Our Indian reality is multilayered.

WATER, BY ASHOKAMITRAN²

When the first part of my paper sought to understand the multiple planes and manifold significance that the elemental sign of water would evoke, the second part would be a close reading of a work of fiction –*Water*– originally written in Tamil by Ashokamitran.³ This work is examined as a social documentary that unfolds over a period of time in a small village in South India. As the name would suggest the entire theme of the work revolves round the image of water–real as well as spiritual and imagined. Even though the theme chosen could easily overflow its fictional boundaries, and end up even as a mere “*chutnification of history*,”[the phrase is Rushdie’s] the writer has dexterously contained his material in an artistic manner focusing for the most on a specific locality and streamlining his tale to a fine narrative point. The story flows in fits and starts. After all, a tiny streamlet could also exhibit the force and ferocity of a tidal wave.

In one of our private conversations the writer informed me that he liked to talk about the life he has seen and experienced–urban and middle class. For him technique is what surfaces automatically – there is no straining after form and style. The story does it for him. Incidents might appear to be loosely strung together in his narratives, apparently unconnected and unrelated, however, they form a deeper chain of significance and meaning because the life of middle class India is so rich in contradiction and incoherence.

Water, is no different. It is an intense and poignant portrait of a suburban corner of Madras city with its un-motorable torn up streets, dusty and filthy, with its teeming population. There are good people and nameless bad people, uncaring governmental activities, depraved individuals like Bhaskara Rao who mercilessly exploit innocent and willing victims like the heroine Jamuna. There are also more determined individuals like her sister Chaya --- married to an army person who cannot manage to get a transfer to the south, and who also has a son she has to leave in the care of her other unwilling relatives.

² Ashokamitran, *Water*, translated into the English by Lakshmi Holmstrom, (New Delhi:Katha,2001)

The main narrative is centred round the lives of these two sisters, and their struggles to live in the drought ridden city, while all around them the saga of an entire humanity is portrayed.

The background of the novel is the severe drought that hit this area in 1969. However, there is no direct reference to this historical fact in the book. The story revolves round the lives of the two sisters—Jamuna and Chaya-- and their lives—urban and lower middleclass. The backdrop is the Chennai city, and the theme for the most is water. Like all rivers in India which originate from the spiritual heights of misty mountains or hill ranges, only to flow down through the mundane middleclass city-scapes or lifeless villages or polluted farmlands, and finally empty into either the Arabian Sea or the Bay of Bengal—polluted and dirtied, carrying all the debris and impurities of this world, and yet even though disfigured are supposed to retain some significant element of the original source—the characters in the work pass through life's hard, grim, realities in a semi-dreamlike state and emerge into the elemental real at the end of the narrative, more focused and more determined than ever. When Jamuna and Chaya walk away hand in hand leaving Bhaskara Rao's car stranded in the mud of the streets, they are in fact proclaiming their new found meaning, strength and determination. Water, of course, always finds its own level.

Water is the major theme of the novel—or rather the lack of it at the beginning, and after the arrival of the rains, the mud and squelch of the suburban middleclass living spaces.

Ashokamitran has said that he wrote *Tannir* as a long short story beginning only with the picture in his mind of a girl who was always seen to be carrying a huge water pot, whether it was at two in the morning or in the heat of the day at high noon. It was serialised in *Kanayaazhi* from July to November 1972 and published in book form in 1973. Many critics in Tamil have drawn attention to the multifaceted levels of meaning in the work, including the symbolic overtones in the title. In her note the translator points out that the story describes the daily struggle of ordinary men and women to find enough water for their needs, their ingenious strategies, their ability to search out any source, and their interaction with an inept municipal staff which is incapable of providing the infrastructure necessary for a growing urban population. The discrete images of life in the sweltering city streets are strung together as in a film. They are unified in the narrative as the winding street itself and the image of water.

Jamuna and Chaya are the main characters. So is Teacher Amma who symbolises the will to live under all odds—veering between a nagging household and a gritty career—and she steps into Jamuna's life as a hot breeze. Bhaskar Rao stands for the developing city's debilitating force that draws everything

into its sordid vortex and all but sucks Jamuna in it too. The opening lines of the novel signal the significance of events to follow:

Jamuna had been lying in bed for the past half hour listening to the water pump. As soon as she detected the slightest change in its sound, she instantly shook herself awake and, switching on the light, she picked up the two brass water pots and ran downstairs.

Water pumps were working away in all the houses of the neighbourhood. At that early morning hour, you could hear the noises unique to each and every water pump, both separately and in unison. They sounded in all the streets, in this one and the next one and the one next to that, in each of the houses there.

The entire narrative revolves round the imagery of water. The simple pressures of daily living and the higher spiritual levels of symbolic ablutions are washed over by this fluid image. The city's bustle, heat and dust, weave in and out of Jamuna's consciousness. While her more liberal minded sister Chaya moves about in a more freer manner, Jamuna fumbles along not too keenly aware of where and in which direction life is leading her. Bhaskar Rao, the small time cinema producer, a self-seeking lout to the core, exploits Jamuna in her more abstract moments, whisking her off as an exhibit to please his clients.

Albeit a trifle reluctant Jamuna gives in to all his whims and fancies and feels abysmally ashamed after every escapade into the city's entrails with him. When Chaya leaves her in a fit of anger she feels her absence as a deep void that makes her life even more meaningless. Even the fetching of water she used to enact as a daily routine and ritual becomes devoid of any significance. Teacher Amma then takes the lead and eggs her on to fetch water in her company.

"...come on, bring your water pot. I will get you some tap water as well."

"I have enough, Akka."

"Do you mean the water from the street tank?"

"Yes."

"If you keep it for another day it will be really stale."

Jamuna switched on the lights.

"Hurry up," said Teacher Amma.

"I really don't need any water today, Akka. My water pot is still half-full."

"I,m telling you to come along. Is that amount of water going to remain the same always? And what will you do if a lizard falls into it suddenly?"

(pp. 46-47)

This contact exposes Jamuna to Teacher Amma's family life. She although a sensitive woman, had been married at a very young age to a congenital consumptive and is constantly ill treated by her sick mother-in-law. Despite her miserable and wretched condition she is able to instil a certain amount of determination into Jamuna's failing will. Jamuna survives a futile attempt at hanging herself and continues her quest for water. In the meanwhile the life of the streets changes – workers dig up the sides of the road in the pretext of installing a water tank and later rake up the entire street in order to reinstall new water pipes. The incoherence and disorder of unplanned metropolitan chaos is reflected well with in the inner life of the protagonist. Or perhaps, it could be read both ways—the chaos is inside first. There are sparks of wit and humour that trigger certain minor incidents which bring considerable relief to the other wise direct narrative. In all the while the focus does not shift from water or the lack of it.

There is a distinct space for the spiritual quality of water, that still retains its imaginary hold in the mind of some people—at least the, so-called upper class Brahmins. Consider this incident that Ashokamitran chooses to highlight:

The people collecting the water were going up and down the street as if they were part of a procession at any given moment, all these people were somehow able to get enough water to run their households. It looked as if it was during this time of drought alone that these people used water most plentifully. Yet in actual fact, in normal times they probably used much more water than they did now, simply because water had never been a commodity to be used with such care. Jamuna stood there, watching the street, not thinking about herself anymore. A Telugu Brahmin widow wearing a red sari, quite an old woman, turned into the street, carrying a large water pot on her hip. She was probably carrying that much water for her use alone. Heaven knew how far she had been carrying that pot. But after she came within Jamuna's vision, it turned out that it was not going to be possible for her to totter even ten steps further. She stood still and looked as if she was swaying. Then, dropping her water pot, she fell right to the ground. Jamuna ran up to her and attempted to pick up the water pot. The old lady cried out, "Don't touch it. Don't touch it." Jamuna held on to the old lady and helped her sit up. Still somewhat unsteady despite Jamuna's grip on her, the old woman kept falling over. Even so, she reached out a hand towards the water pot which now lay on its side, slightly dented, in a pool of muddy water. Jamuna held on to the old woman more firmly. By that time, four or five others had gathered there. The old lady pulled herself together after a fashion. But before she could herself straighten up the water pot which lay next to her, someone had pushed ahead, touched it and lifted it up. The old lady was immediately overcome with weakness once again. When those who had gathered there spoke to her kindly and tried to help her to her feet, she even began to cry. She rose unsteadily to her feet and grasped hold of her water pot, barely able to stand. She tipped out its contents—for it was nearly half-

full-on to the ground. She shook herself free from Jamuna's grasp and tottered forward on her own. (pp. 80-81)

Jamuna appears bewildered at the Brahmin widow's behaviour. Even through the agonising days of drought many believers in orthodoxy, practise what is known as *madi* or ceremonial purity. For the Brahmin, the early morning bath is no less significant in the spiritual as well as the physical planes. Cleansing the body is also at the same time a process of cleansing the mind and spirit—the *antaratman*. The water for this purpose has to be collected by the ritually pure person and should not be touched or breathed upon by the *impure other*. In case it is thus contaminated by the *touch* that water becomes unusable. The old woman would rather pour out the rest of the impure water than carry it to her home. Perhaps Ashokamitran works out this irony in the narrative by setting this scene as a deliberate backdrop against which the actions and decisions of Jamuna, Chaya and Teacher Amma could be examined. All the people who inhabit the novel are victims of the development syndrome. Their lives, moral as well as ethical choices are challenged and threatened by the absence of free flowing water and their ever narrowing suburban spaces. As they are crowded out, their beliefs also are tested. Even when it finally drizzles they do not have much option to collect and retain the rain water and are forced to watch it flow down to the streets and collect in puddles and squelchy mud.

For Jamuna the regular collecting of water seems to provide some meaning to her otherwise meaningless life –it is her major occupation. She is aware of water –or rather the lack of it always. For Chaya, her sister's obsession with water seems only to signify her lack of commitment to any other action. She is a more determined person, although at many places along the narrative she too breaks down and seeks the comfort of her sister's shoulders to cry on.

At the end of the novel, Bhaskar Rao's new car is stranded in the muddy streets, and he stands around quite helplessly, Chaya takes Jamuna's hand and the sisters move on unconcernedly, yet certainly more determined to face the odds of life. Throughout the story the tension is built up and maintained by the patched up life in the streets that thirst for water, and in the end the mud that remains after the rain washes over.

Water for Jamuna symbolises all her hopes, desires and aspirations. It also signals her metaphysical existence although she constantly seeks it in its physical form. Very much like the parched and thirsty land her soul searches for the elixir of life in all eagerness and hunger. Her dreary existence on the other hand corresponds to the dreariness that she sees all round her. The barrenness of the suburban existence stands for her own meaningless existence- physically and philosophically. The only work that she does is the daily collecting of water

in containers from taps and distant wells. And much like the substance that water is, she allows herself to be contained and manipulated by the others. All this she does with undisguised disgust and uncommitted will. Ultimately when it does drizzle after a long spell of drought she finds that she has nothing more to look forward to. Bhaskara Rao has left and so has Chaya. Her own family had nothing more to offer her. Nevertheless the downpour symbolises a new direction in Jamuna's life and in the life of the streets as well. Bahaskara Rao's new car gets stranded in the muddy streets and metaphorically allows Jamuna to get out of his reach finally.

Water also makes and remakes the thread of continuity for the governmental activities in the novel. The authorities begin by digging the roadsides during the drought in search of the water pipes that were laid earlier. The unskilled workers manage to leave the road in a ramshackle state afterwards, stranding vehicles and the public after a few showers. Further they also inadvertently break up the electrical connections of the streetlights plunging the streets into darkness for months. The helpless life of the middle class that are even more complicated by the meshes of the establishment and its power structures are clearly highlighted by the narrative. And water forms its connective thread.

Ashokamitran's *Water* is a tale that does not consciously strive to please the reader. It depicts certain characters in certain situations in an impressionistic montage of happenings much like the perennial imagery of water that holds it together. All characters are linked up either by the scarcity of water or its lack and dire need—at many levels—the gross physical, the metaphysical and the spiritual.

In the rhetoric of Indian views of reality as lived experience the significance of water is thus multifaceted. Water is both transparent and opaque-- it *conceals* and *reveals* at the same time. Bereft of water there is no life, however, too much of it hastens human casualty. Life depends on fresh water and the regular water cycle. If the water sources are over exploited severe drought is the result. On account of constant misuse and unwarranted developmental activities desertification has set in where once the vital fluid flowed liberally replenishing and nourishing the dynamic of existence. Despite all the scientific *knowledge* that the growth and extensive advancement and reach of Ecology as a scientific discipline has effected and ensured, —environmental education is compulsorily introduced even at the lower schools— technological wastage continues unabated in India. Primarily, because the powers-that-be, act in deliberate unconcern, indifference and incoherence. Lack of proper planning and uncaring misuse of available infrastructure and resources, coupled with managerial clumsiness, account for the most. As a developing country India has in the present become a vast unfolding field of possibilities and potentialities- a veritable market place. Economic forces that manipulate the gator-like grip of market capitalism appear to have unleashed their terrorist activities in full

swing. Everywhere we come across the slogans of development and urbanisation. Of course, that is apparently the only way open before any country in the present. Indigenous ways of development and calls to appropriate technology however, simply fall on deaf ears. The twenty first century is branded and sold out as a century of information and hitherto unprecedented rise in the mass production of consumables and luxury items: the ill-informed common man and woman are swept off their feet by the onrush of this materialistic culture. Capitalist forces present the promise of collective satisfaction and plenitude of goods and goodies albeit through a *virtual image*. Like the donkey in the fable that keeps on moving forward in the hope of reaching the carrot dangling within its easy reach in front of it, we move on without realising that the carrot is attached to a stick tied *to our necks!* Water is one of the prime elements that our lives depend upon, and fresh water is over-exploited and misused. Our uncaring ways of life selfishly motivated and technologically never gratified, wanting more and more but having less and less, lead us on to our inevitable doom. The environment is not unlimited; nature is not unlimited for the taking. We pollute our earth, pollute our air and pollute our waters. We create debris and garbage on an unprecedented scale and are left gaping on how to dispose of all the waste. Industrial waste as well as nuclear waste, would add to the growing concern of any responsible, thinking intellectual in. Sadly enough, Bhopal and Chernobyl seem to have left hardly any remnants of global concern in our minds. After all human memory is so short!

The fact remains that, if at all the world is to go in for another war, it is certainly going to be for the dominant rights and privileges over safe and uncontaminated drinking water. While on one side we in India look upon water as a sacred element—whatever our religious bias and beliefs—we also relentlessly misuse this elixir of life inadvertently-- the ignorant masses perhaps unknowingly towing the line that the developed countries throw in. When we suffer excruciating droughts and unexpected failures of the monsoon cycle, we also reel severely under unforeseen and untimely floods, cyclones and tsunamis. At every step the natural cycle of water speaks dread, death and needless loss to the common people of this part of the world. While the rich and the politically powerful somehow manage to escape or struggle free from the natural and unnatural disasters, the poor and the marginalised suffer terribly. The division between the haves and the have-nots speak volumes here as elsewhere. *Water* thus has a social-political dimension that needs to be re-examined, because the possession, reach and accessibility to clean potable water constitute its political dimension. After all, water is one of the prime elements in the making and unmaking of life and *Water* is our life line.

The ancient Indian experience of undivided existence that does not bifurcate the material and the spiritual is beautifully brought out in the *Purna mantra*:

Purnamadah Purnamidam Purnatpurna mudachyate.

Purnasya Purnamadaya Purnamev avashisyate. (*Yajurveda, Shanti Mantra* – Chapter 40)

[That is Purna, this is Purna, Purna comes out of Purna.
If Purna is subtracted from Purna, still Purna is left.]⁴

This mantra could be read as a celebration of the benignity of the earth and its biological and metaphysical diversity and plenitude. Each of the *pancabhutas* –the five elements– individually are complete in themselves; they symbolise a holistic existence, a completion –*sampurna*– within and without. Water is one among the primal and complete elements. We can use it, we can misuse it, we can celebrate it. Somewhere along the way when we ceased to look upon the non-human nature as sacred, we allowed ourselves to look upon it as mere resource to be utilised and exploited. And that has made all the difference.

This tension between the implications of the ancient spiritual awareness of water as holy and sacred and the created image of water as resource to be manipulated and exploited for utility in the everyday world of contemporary reality continues to haunt the Indian mind. The life lines are so transparent and at the same time equally opaque.

NOTE: The state of *Tamil Nadu* lies on the east of the Western ghats–the row of mountains that stretch from Mumbai to Cape Comorin in the west coast– and is dependent on North East monsoons for rain water. (There are two cycles of Monsoons–the South West that usually begins in June and the North East that sets in by October.) It is usually draught-prone and yet in the last monsoon cycle there were unprecedented floods. There are countless reasons for the droughts and floods but the most dominant ones are merciless and relentless deforestation, unwarranted, unplanned urban developmental activities on river banks (and beside other fresh water sources) that cause siltation, sedimentation and soil erosion, etc.

Ashokamitran: Real name Tyagarajan, writes in Tamil, lives in Chennai, the capital city of Tamilnadu, south India. Ashokamitran belongs to the eminent group of Tamil writers who won recognition for their storytelling ability and

⁴ *Purna* is derived from root "Pri" meaning to fill. Thus *Purna* means full or complete. In this context, *Purna* can also be interpreted to mean infinity.

craftsmanship in the 1960-s. Began his career with the prize winning play *Anbin Parisu*, followed by many short stories, collection of stories–*Viduthalai*–and eight novels, including *Karinda Nizhalkal*, *Padinettavadu Atchakodu*, *Indru*, *Manasasrovar*, *Vizhaa Maalai Podil*. He is also a distinguished essayist and critic, and was the executive editor of *Kanaiyaazhi* for many years. Sahitya Akademi award in 1996.

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